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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000706

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SUBJECT: SONDHI'S LAST STAND PEACEFUL, ON TO THE SEQUEL

REF: BANGKOK 00677

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary. Thaksin-nemesis Sondhi Limthongkul's February 4th rally drew a massive but peaceful crowd to the Royal Plaza Park in Bangkok. Pro-government thugs and violence were a no-show. Sondhi delivered his petition outlining Thaksin's "crimes" and loss of legitimacy to representatives of the King and reportedly met personally with Army Chief Sonthi Boonyarataklin to discuss these issues. As expected, the PM remained defiant throughout the weekend, telling supporters in Chiang Mai (where he was visiting) that he was determined not to let "stupid" people unseat him, and stating during his weekly radio address that the only person who could push him from office was the King. Buoyed by his strong showing Saturday, Sondhi has called for another rally on February 11. Thaksin plans to counter with a major speech on February 9--his fifth anniversary as PM--outlining all the good he has done for the country. Rhetoric aside, Thaksin remains firmly in command, but last Saturday proved that Sondhi and his allies are not going away anytime soon. End Summary.

SONDHI-PALOOZA TAKES CAPITAL BY STORM

2. (SBU) Media mogul and Thaksin-foe Sondhi Limthongkul's latest effort to rally the public against the Prime Minister transpired peacefully Saturday night. A massive crowd--press estimates range from 20,000 up to 100,000 people; we'd agree with the latter--filled the Royal Plaza Park square from midday into the wee hours. The diverse crowd, representing a wide range of ages, provinces and walks of life, entertained themselves with games of dart throwing at and hopscotch on the Prime Minister's likeness. Organizers handed out yellow T-shirts and arm bands with the slogan "save the country." Merchants traded in an array of products with more colorful and direct attacks on the PM--many not fit for print in a family reporting cable. Of note, representatives from labor groups, anti-electric power privatization, the teachers and poor farmers were all present.

3. (C) Following a series of pre-game speakers and entertainers, Sondhi--looking vaguely messianic in his matching white headband and T-shirt, which stood out in the yellow-clad crowd--took the stage about an hour after sunset. The late middle-aged media magnate decried the corruption of the Thaksin government in newly strident terms and led the crowd in chants of "Thaksin, get out!" before reading aloud his petition asking the King to dissolve the parliament and replace the PM. After asking the crowd to wait patiently, Sondhi and his entourage of movie-cameras and flag-bearers strode down the street two blocks to the home of Privy Council Chairman Prem Tinsulonda to deliver this petition. (Note. Press coverage focused on whether Prem would be present to receive the petition--his presence could be seen as a signal of Palace support for Sondhi. Prem was not present; an aide received the petition. However, the Sondhi camp maintains that Prem's implied consent to have the petition delivered to his house--he could have blocked the entire ritual if he so desired--is itself a positive sign for their camp. End Note.)

4. (C) Upon his return to the square at around 2230, Sondhi took a break as a series of other speakers continued to rail against the Prime Minister. Shortly after midnight, a video outlining Thaksin's alleged crimes was played and Sondhi spoke again. In an intriguing wrinkle, Sondhi reportedly met with Army Chief Sonthi Boonyarataklin at around this time to discuss the petition. (Note. General Sonthi has assiduously avoided any public politicking. End Note.) At around 0730 hours on Sunday morning the crowd sang the King's anthem once more and peacefully broke up.

5. (SBU) Despite unconfirmed reports that pro-Thaksin groups would seek to confront Sondhi's masses and provoke a conflict as they had at previous rallies, the Thaksin thugs were a no-show. A single heckler was ejected in smooth fashion in the middle of Sondhi's speech, but the several hundred uniformed police in attendance had little to distract them from their boredom.

THAKSIN DEFENDS HIMSELF, DEFIANT AS EVER

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16. (C) Throughout the weekend, the Prime Minister remained defiant. During his visit to his hometown of Chiang Mai, Thaksin bluntly told supporters that he will complete his remaining three years in office, despite the efforts of "stupid" people. These off-the-cuff comments aside, the Prime Minister has generated more controversy with his scripted radio address early Saturday morning. In an apparent attempt to assert his humbleness, Thaksin stated that, "it would only take one person to remove me from office...His Majesty the King. If he whispered to me, 'Thaksin, it's time to go,' I would certainly prostrate myself at his feet and resign."

17. (C) Anti-Thaksin politicians, including Sondhi and Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, as well as some media outlets pounced on this statement, claiming that the PM had "crossed a line" by directly dragging the monarch into a political row. Indeed, even some politically neutral Thai contacts raised an eyebrow at the PM's suggestion, which could be read as a direct challenge to the King.

#### AND ANOTHER CABINET RESIGNATION

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18. (C) Following the resignation of Culture Minister Uraiwan Thienthong on Friday (ref), Technology Minister Sora-at Klingpratoom--also a member of the dissident Wang Nam Yen faction of the ruling Thai Rak Thai party--announced that he would resign from the cabinet as well. Neither has resigned their seat in parliament. (Note. Faction leader Sanoh Tientong and his group have long been a thorn in Thaksin's mega-party flank and appear to be intent on pressuring the PM to kick them out of the party, which may allow them to keep their parliamentary seats while forming a new party or allying with the opposition. End Note.)

19. (C) Members of the Wang Nam Yom faction (not to be confused with Wang Nam Yen) were quick to deny rumors that faction member and Labour Minister Somsak Tehpsuthin was also preparing to resign from the cabinet. In a press conference at Somsak's house on Sunday, the group pledged their continued support to the PM.

#### MONDAY MORNING QUARTERBACKING

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110. (C) Media coverage of the Saturday event was relatively predictable. Television coverage was spotty. Some channels downplayed the size of the crowd and no commercial channels covered the event live. Most television stations gave broad coverage to the PM's trip to Chiang Mai, however. The traditionally anti-Thaksin English and Thai-language press was strident, with some headlines trumpeting that Thaksin's days are numbered and claiming that Sondhi's rally was finally allowing the disparate threads of the opposition to coalesce.

#### COMMENT

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111. (C) Saturday night was a knock-out for neither side, but we have to give this one to Sondhi on points. The media mogul kept his crusade (and reputation) alive to fight another day while producing the largest demonstration since the democracy protests of 1992. Thaksin managed to take a relatively simple statement of reality regarding the King's authority and turn it into a new opposition weapon against him. That said, Sondhi's goal (shared by many of the so-called Bangkok "intelligentsia") of ousting Thaksin remains elusive. Thaksin's lock on power remains solid, even if some internal Thai Rak Thai wrangling suggests some nervousness among his cohorts. So this Saturday's rally is likely to attract another fairly large turnout. But despite the bad publicity surrounding the Ample Rich stock sale, it appears unlikely that Thaksin's critics will be able to galvanize enough public momentum to alter the political status quo--assuming, of course, that Thaksin doesn't lose his cool.

BOYCE